

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY PRETORIA
AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM
AMCONSUL LUBUMBASHI
AMEMBASSY LISBON
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 10926

E.O. 1652: GDS
TAGS: PINT CG AO ZA
SUBJECT: ZAIRE: REOPENING THE BENGUELA RAILWAY

SUMMARY. CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF TANGANIKA CONCESSIONS HAS SUGGESTED TO US TECHNICAL-LEVEL MEETINGS OF THE RAILWAY GENERAL MANAGERS IN ANGOLA, ZAIRE AND ZAMBIA WITH A VIEW TO REOPENING THE BENGUELA RAILWAY. AS A SPECIFIC PROPOSAL WITH OBVIOUS REGIONAL BENEFITS, THE PROPOSITION COULD USEFULLY SUPPORT OUR EFFORTS TO PROMOTE POLITICAL RECONCILIATION BETWEEN KINSHASA AND LUANDA. END SUMMARY.

1. ON JULY 10 EMBASSY OFFICER SAW ALEXANDER HOOD, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF TANGANIKA CONCESSIONS, WHICH OWNS 90 PERCENT OF THE BENGUELA RAILWAY IN ANGOLA. HOOD SAID THE RAIL LINE IS NOW OPEN FROM LOBITO TO THE ZAIRE BORDER BUT IS ONLY OPERATING AT APPROXIMATELY 15 PERCENT CAPACITY. ALTHOUGH A WRECKED LOCOMOTIVE BLOCKS THE BRIDGE AT
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TEXEIRA DE SOUSA, THE RECENT SHABA FIGHTING AND MOVEMENT OF KATANGAN FORCES HAD LITTLE EFFECT ON THE RAILWAY.

2. UNITA BANDS CONTINUE TO HARASS THE RAIL LINE BUT SO FAR POSE NO SERIOUS OBSTACLE TO THE IRREGULAR MOVEMENT OF TRAINS. UNITA EITHER TEARS UP TRACK OR FIRES ON PASSENGER WAGONS WHICH MAY BE CARRYING CUBANS, BUT OVER-

ALL THERE HAS BEEN A DECREASE FROM A YEAR AGO OF SERIOUS ATTACKS ALONG THE LINE. IF FULL TRANSPORT OPERATIONS WERE RESUMED, HOWEVER, HOOD EXPECTS A MORE DIFFICULT SECURITY SITUATION WITH COPPER-CARRYING TRAINS PRESENTING A TEMPTING TARGET FOR UNITA DISRUPTION.

3. AFTER SOME DISCUSSION OF NETO'S POLITICAL SITUATION, EMBASSY OFFICER DESCRIBED CURRENT EFFORTS TO BRING ABOUT AN ANGOLA-ZAIRE RECONCILIATION. HOOD RESPONDED BY SUGGESTING THAT THE COMMON INTEREST IN THE RAILWAY COULD UNDERPIN THE POLITICAL OBJECTIVE. HE SAID HIS GENERAL MANAGER IN ANGOLA AND THE MPLA DIRECTOR ON THE COMPANY'S BOARD (FALCAO) WERE BOTH URGING A TECHNICAL MEETING WITH THEIR COUNTERPARTS FROM ZAIRE AND ZAMBIA WITH THE PROSPECT OF EVENTUALLY REOPENING THE REGIONAL NETWORK. HOOD POINTED OUT THAT BOTH ZAIRE AND ZAMBIA ARE IN DESPERATE NEED OF OPENINGS TO THE SEA AND THAT THE BENGUELA RAILROAD COULD RETURN TO NEAR FULL CAPACITY (1600 TONS OF COPPER PER DAY) WITHIN WEEKS. FOR ITS PART, ANGOLA NEEDS BOTH THE INCOME AND THE INDEPENDENCE, HE SAID.

4. COMMENT: SINCE THE CIVIL WAR IN ANGOLA, TANGANIKA CONCESSIONS HAS WANTED TO RESTORE THE NORMAL OPERATION OF THE BENGUELA RAILWAY AND HAS PERIODICALLY SOUGHT WAYS OF MEETING THIS OBJECTIVE. WE PASS ALONG THE ABOVE
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REPORT BECAUSE OF HOOD'S SPECIFIC PROPOSAL FOR TECHNICAL-LEVEL DISCUSSIONS ON RAIL TRANSPORT IN THE AREA. THE IDEA STRIKES US AS A USEFUL SUGGESTION WHICH MIGHT BE RAISED IN OUR EFFORTS TO FOSTER RECONCILIATION BETWEEN ZAIRE AND ANGOLA AND WHICH WOULD HAVE OBVIOUS ECONOMIC ADVANTAGES FOR THOSE TWO COUNTRIES AS WELL AS ZAMBIA.

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